South Today Was Far Ahead Of Its Time

By WILLIAM BOOZER

A gifted Memphis couple and an ambitious Memphis State University Press have turned the wick up on a flickering flame of what was once a strong beam of enlightenment from atop Old Screamer Mountain in North Georgia.

Lillian Smith and Paula Snelling did some extensive probing inside the mind and heart of the South and the nation during 1936-45 in a little magazine that faded away but will never die as long as there exist copies or reprints of articles, and now the latest offering from MSU Press. Which will be a long time. The man who said there is nothing deader than yesterday's newspaper or magazine hadn't heard about such things as microfilm and anthologies.

THE WORK OF these Georgia literary busy-bodies comes alive again in "From the Mountain," edited and introduced by Dr. Redding S. Sugg Jr., a freelance writer and former English professor, and his wife, Dr. Helen White Sugg, a Memphis State English professor. It is an anthology of the magazine first known as Pseudopodia, then North Georgia Review, then South Today. James D. Simmons and his colleagues at MSU Press serve it up in a handsome package that Alfred Knopf himself would have liked. Nevermind it being priced for a selective audience at $16. It's in the libraries as well as the bookstores.

Here's one that Lester Maddox won't have room for in his Underground Atlanta salon. South Today, as we'll call it, got people and places, including the post office, all stirred up with its liberal pronouncements from Old Screamer near Clayton in Gene Talmadge's Georgia. The Misses Smith and Snelling were ahead of their time, and for a lot of now people several years in front of today. But for 10 years they did their thing and had their say. They did and said (wrote) some right interesting things.

South Today was a mixture of social commentary and literary comment. There were essays, contests, surveys and symposia. And criticism on some real winners, like Faulkner, Steinbeck, Wolfe, Sherwood Anderson, Carson McCullers and W. J. Cash. Contributors included James Still of Kentucky in the anthology with two poems and a delightful piece of short fiction, and W. E. B. DuBois.

THE EDITORS ROCKED the Southern boat with some cutting commentary, and one feels that Lillian Smith had great fun turning out her "Dope with Lime" column (remember when Coke was called "dope," and those who found it overly sweet would cut it with lime?). Miss Smith beat "You Can't Eat Magnolias" by 30 years with "There Are Things To Do," in which she gave some pointers on how to be nice. This was among the reprints, with 250,000 copies distributed.

There were things to do in 1942, as there are today and as there will be in 2002. South Today was saying get on with it. Change was rampant. "We can sputter and break a blood vessel or we can roll up our sleeves and get to work to make (changes) happen smoothly and harmoniously," Miss Smith wrote. "The decision is ours only in what we do about it; not in the changes themselves." Some things never change.

Strange, though, how two people can look at an apple with one seeing an orange and the other a grapefruit. We're told that interviews with students brought a warning that "a 'generation gap' would result from aversion to a war felt by the young to be unjustified." That's World War II they're talking about. As we recall it, we were in a big hurry to get into a uniform to make the world safe for democracy.

Also, what's this about "sinister connections" pointing to the acute irony of Negro youth drafted to fight abroad outrages which they and their forebears had suffered for generations. Lynchings we know about, and Andersonville, too. But we didn't know about Auschwitz and Dachau down South.

SO IT GOES. If Lillian Smith were living today, she'd be on top of Old Screamer screaming don't buy lettuce. Paula Snelling's political and sociological leanings nowadays are her own business, but one supposes that she is pleased to have seen many changes trumpeted by her and the co-chairman of their lonely hearts club — even if not all of them came about because white Southerners rolled up their sleeves. Their little magazine lit the way for better understanding among a people who still cry out for deliverance from imbecilities born of ignorance and hate.

But barren hearts and muddled minds can be found among "liberals" and "conservatives" alike. What would be nice for a change would be a world void of all prejudice and bigotry, from the right and from the left. A world of people who just love one another. A world free of hangups on race and class and envy and greed. Dream on.

Remember Quentin Compson and his roommate at Harvard? "Why do you hate the South?" the roommate asked Quentin. "I don't hate it,' Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; 'I don't hate it,' he said. I don't hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; I don't. I don't! I don't don't hate it! I don't hate it!